

OLYMPIC POSTPONEMENT AND THE FUTURE OF
JAPAN'S IMAGE

by

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For the first time in Olympic history, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were postponed for one year, taking place in July and August 2021 due to the COVID-19 emergency. This paper explores the effect hosting the Olympics during a pandemic has had on Japan's image using the frameworks of soft power and sports diplomacy. In this thesis, I code interview responses for themes to explore shifts in Japan's country image as a result of Tokyo 2020. The trends that emerge in the findings of this paper are Japan's handling of the pandemic and mental health advocacy. These findings indicate significant opportunities for Japan to improve its image using the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as a catalyst. As such, these historic Games establish Tokyo 2020 as the benchmark for future Olympics to take place in a pandemic-affected world.

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Introduction

Japan represents one of the world's most ambitious and successful national branding activities, working to rebrand itself from a nation known for its role in WWII into a harmonious and civilized nation (Taku, 2019). The sudden pandemic calamity surrounding the 2020 Tokyo Olympics –an international symbol of peace– is a clear step in the wrong direction for Japan's image (Clarke et al., 2021). Adding to existing perspectives, this qualitative study seeks to explore and analyze how global perspectives of Japan have shifted as a result of these events by interviewing professionals on how their image of Japan was affected by the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. In this introduction and literature review, I will outline the current predicament of Japan and soft power, then the history of Japan's image and strategies to rebrand Japan in the twenty-first century.

The COVID-19 pandemic arrived at a particularly unfortunate time for Japan—on the cusp of the 2020 Olympics. Fiscally, COVID-19 hit the Japanese economy while it was already down. Market observers were counting on the 2020 Olympics to rebound Japan's economy from a dip prompted by a tax hike in October 2019. An audit at the end of 2019 found that the Japanese government had spent over 1 trillion yen on infrastructure projects related to the Olympics (Imahashi & Regalado, 2020). A hugely capital-intensive undertaking, the Olympic postponement ended up causing Japan losses estimated at around 6 billion USD, spurring Japan into a recession due to preparations for tourists who would never arrive (Xing, 2020).

Still, the psychological effect of the postponement may end up costing Japan even more. In a 2015 report on strengthening sports diplomacy in Japan, experts expressed the 2020 Games as contributing to Japan's image as a “peace-loving

country,” and emphasizing “how Japan can contribute to the world” (Kazuo et al., 2015). The tension resulting from the postponement and controversy surrounding Japanese vaccination rates evidently does not fit Japan’s desired image of order and peace.

Literature Review

The intangible effects of Tokyo 2020 can be analyzed using the concept soft power coined by Joseph Nye in the 1990's. Popularized in the ensuing decades, words such as "brand image" and "brand identity" are used to describe the perceptions of a country amongst various "stakeholders," such as other nations, potential tourists, and investors—similar to the way businesses market their brands to an audience (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). In his essay defining soft power, Nye (1990) suggests a recent shift in past decades from sheer military power to factors such as technology, education, and economic growth as the new determinants of power. These "soft power" attributes may outweigh traditional notions of power such as geography, war tactics and population—commonly referred to as hard power (Nye, 1990). In modern international relations, soft power is defined as the ability to influence other countries into doing what you want without using hard power tactics.

For Japan, diplomacy relies on the emphasis of soft power, particularly its cultural outputs such as manga, fashion, architecture and design (Dinnie, 2008). Sports also falls under this category. Sports diplomacy has been recognized as a powerful force to reshape international perceptions and for countries to reposition themselves globally peacefully (Dubinsky, 2018). Such soft power is a crucial element of branding efforts for Japan, as its military presence is reliant on U.S. forces, and its economic policy is often criticized by Western audiences for "being insular and closed" (Dinnie, 2008). Japan therefore tends to rely on the influences of its soft power to a higher degree than other similar countries.

Japan has been trying to reform its brand image using soft power techniques for decades, a process coined “Cool Japan” (Taku, 2019). Cool Japan’s purpose is to create opportunities for Japan, such as for foreign direct investment, trade deals, and even tourism. Sports diplomacy has proved a powerful element of this strategy. Tokyo’s 1964 bid to host the Olympics represented an early national branding exercise for Japan to establish its new postwar image. Globally, the bid established Japan as the only viable candidate of all the East Asian nations to represent the Olympics movement, and by extension, the West (Taku, 2019). Moreover, the Games drew attention away from the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and on to its emerging technological prowess.

Japan has continued this legacy of sports diplomacy by securing the bids for the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics, 2002 FIFA World Cup with South Korea, 2019 Rugby World Cup, and the 2020 Summer Olympics (Rookwood & Adeosun, 2021). These events act as “confirmation that the host nation is a good international citizen and if the diplomatic posture, image and message is thoughtfully crafted and aligned to positive sporting values, the perception of a foreign public can be significantly altered” (Murray & Pigman, 2014). Recently, Japan has been pursuing this goal of sports diplomacy to change its own image, particularly in response to the March 2011 Disasters (also known as the Great Sendai Earthquake or Great Tōhoku Earthquake) which raised safety concerns and struck a serious blow to Japan’s image, particularly tourism (Tourism Agency, 2011, p. 88-89). To Japan, the 2020 Olympics had seemed like an opportunity to project an image of safety and peace in the aftermath of the triple disaster.

According to Western views, Japan has only recently emerged as an international superpower (Marković, 2015). After observing *sakoku* (a policy of isolation lasting from 1639 to 1853) Japan began the process of accelerated Westernization starting in the Meiji Restoration Era. Japan began to actively cultivate its national identity in this era in an attempt to avoid colonization by the West (Morris-Suzuki, 1998). The Meiji state intensified Japanese nationalism through the education system and military training, while forcing standardization on outer regions and cultures in areas such as Okinawa and Hokkaido. Pressured by the threats of the outside Western world, these efforts helped shape the national identity of Japan (Marković, 2015). Literature during this period furthered the assertion that Japan was the only country that had retained purity, due to their connection to the sun goddess and “human feeling” that was inherently Japanese– in turn asserting that Japan’s culture was superior to and different from its neighbor, China (Morris-Suzuki, 1998).

This rising nationalism started Japan on its trajectory leading up to the nation’s role in WWII. Then, recovering from the devastation caused by the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan emerged just decades later as the world’s third largest economy. Japan is a model case study for enlightenment modernization by Western standards. Under Lewis and Wigen’s definition of Westernness as a “qusai temporal scale,” Japan is used as an example of a Westernized nation due to its economic success (Lewis & Wigen, 1997, p.33-72). Japan’s position crafts a complex image of a country at the intersections of East and West in modern times.

As Japan continues to establish itself on the world stage, it is constantly undergoing change and diversification, and the Olympics remain an opportunity to

display these manifestations. As a symbol for international peace, the Olympics are majorly important for a global city like Tokyo. Japan's 2016 bid for the Games advocated that hosting would allow it to show "Tokyo as a 'mature' (*seijuku shita*) metropolis building on the legacies left by the previous Olympiad" (Taku, 2019). The Olympics themselves have also developed and its messages and symbolism are now able to reach more people today with streaming technology and social media interaction than ever before (Adair, 2013). The highly public nature of the modern Olympics presents an interesting challenge for host cultures to negotiate their image to a global audience.

Japan's image journey has faced many challenges along the way, and frankly a disproportionate amount of tragedy for a country of its size. In light of the lasting impact of these events on global perceptions of Japan, Duignan explains the "dual shock" produced by the ecological disaster following Fukushima and economic shock of Tokyo 2020 present ideal conditions to prepare and leverage a host's "cultural assets" (Duignan, 2021). He emphasizes Tokyo 2020 as a flagship political project in the neoliberalization of Japan, seeing it as an opportunity for Japan to grow and revise its desired image.

Other scholars share Duignan's optimism, suggesting that the re-scheduled 2020 Olympics were actually met with an attitude of "understanding and solidarity from the global community of the consequences of hosting the Games" (Akhir et al., 2021). Because COVID-19 was a worldwide crisis, their study found people were more likely to sympathize with Japan rather than to criticize it for COVID-19 outbreaks. However, in light of the major developments regarding vaccination, athletes and the IOC

(International Olympic Committee) in the weeks leading up to and during the Games, these ideas need to be reevaluated. The rest of this thesis is dedicated to exploring how the reality of the 2020 Games was perceived in relation to Japanese country image and what Japan can do for its image in the time after Tokyo 2020.

Methodology

This study aims to analyze the short term image effects of an Olympic Games unlike any other. By investigating the perspectives of stakeholders from backgrounds of media, business and Japanese studies, this research examines the content of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in the minds of American and Japanese interview subjects.

The paper is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1

How has hosting the Olympics during a pandemic affected Japan's image?

RQ2

What strategies might Japan pursue to recover?

Seeking the answers to these questions, I use a qualitative approach consisting of 10 semi structured interviews over a three month period from August 2021 to September 2021, directly after the closing of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, which were held from July 23, 2021 to August 8, 2021. Subjects were selected based on their familiarity with one or more of the following subjects: Japan, sports, Olympics, media, Japanese national image, and Japanese-American relations. Titles of participants within these qualifications include but are not limited to educators, journalists and business executives. Participants represent perspectives from both Japanese and American nationality. International perceptions of Japan are a valuable commodity and something Japan has prioritized as it attempts to usher in a new era of Japanese tourism (Wilson, 2012). So, by conducting qualitative research of individuals with experience from both countries, I aim to incorporate a cross-cultural perspectives of the events during and leading up to Tokyo 2020.

Diversity in participant backgrounds and experience was utilized by this study to produce professional yet different viewpoints, as described in the sport event meta-review by Weed (2009). However, it is worth noting that not every participant in this study can be considered an expert on Japan, the Olympics, or even soft power. Instead, these participants simply reflect personal yet professional and informed opinions on these matters. The main goal of the interview questions was to discover how this audience felt about the Olympics given the unique circumstances of the pandemic. Participants were mainly asked what stood out in their minds about this Olympics, providing insights into Japan's brand image. As opposed to athlete interviews or official IOC documents or reports, the responses in this study are meant to provide insight into some of the reality of how Japan was presented to larger external and internal audiences during games. An interview guide containing the questions can be found in the appendix of this paper.

Additionally, interview respondents were limited to people affiliated with the University of Oregon. The University's strong East Asian Studies program and Japanese connections presented a robust pool of qualified participants to interview who would be easy to reach out to for undergraduate research. Participants include University of Oregon alumni working in cross-cultural contexts, and staff or professors with experience in the fields of business, media or Japan, but excludes current undergrad students. The University of Oregon in particular represents a national landmark for sports in the American Northwest, especially track and field. Since 1972, the University's Hayward field has hosted the Olympic Track and Field trials six times. Dubbed "Tracktown, USA", sports are part of the school's identity (Howard-Grenville

et al., 2013). Participant responses reflected both internal and external perspectives of Japan. I used convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods to select participants due to perceived availability of the target population and to make it accessible for me to find more participants within the set conditions (Alvi, 2016). The table below shows the different fields of each participant. I reference the participant numbers when referring to quotes or paraphrased sections of interviews.

Table 1: Participants

	Field
1	Business Instructor
2	Business Executive
3	Business Executive
4	Olympic Journalist
5	Photojournalist
6	Japanese Scholar
7	Media Studies Faculty
8	Education Director
9	Business Executive
10	Business Executive

Participants were questioned over Zoom video call with audio transcribed recording. In the field of international studies, comparable qualitative studies consist of around 20 interviews (Duignan, 2021). However, based on the availability of qualified applicants, only about half of that number was attainable. Saturation was reached after the point of ten interviews.

For this study, I followed an inductive approach from Saldaña (2016) to develop themes after the coding activity. Response transcripts were coded, categorized and then coded again for themes for two cycles of coding. Interview transcripts were the sole form of data for this project, so coding activities were focused on extracting cultural values, interpersonal experiences (values coding) and small quotes (in-vivo coding) from the audio transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). The combined in-vivo and values codes were coded by category, then divided into broader terms representing themes. This is illustrated by Table 2 below. Themes encompassed the concepts from the coded categories, but were not necessarily terms mentioned directly by the participants in their interviews. The four themes derived from this approach are drawn from all ten interviewees to capture the main ideas of the participants' answers. This paper also relies on primarily journalistic article sources to supplement participant responses, as of the time of data collection and analysis, there were very few peer-reviewed articles on the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. In addition to journalistic sources, media articles are cited throughout the findings section to expand on the participant responses and contextualize the themes derived from the data.

Analyzing the themes that emerged, I investigate the effect hosting the Olympics during a pandemic had on Japan. For practical application of these findings, I identify possible areas of focus for Japan to address international attitudes post-Olympics, as they relate to the areas of tourism, business and soft power.

Table 2: Coding Themes

Themes	Categories	Code Examples
Showcasing Japan	Japanese technology	The Olympics are useful for exhibiting modern Japanese tech
	Hospitality	“The Japanese were lovely and polite hosts.”
	National pride	Japanese pride stood out this Olympics
	Recovery Games	The 1964 Olympics were a symbol of post-war economic recovery for Japan
	Culture	The goal of the Olympics is to promote a better understanding of the host culture
	Japanese image	Representation of Japan this Olympics avoided controversy in favor of only positive things about Japan
	Reviving tourism	The Olympics are a way for Japan to promote tourism, especially from China
	Criticism	Corruption
Financial		Japan did not get the return on its investment of the Olympics
Mediated culture		“This Olympics was heavily mediated by the international media core.”
Protests		The postponement created space for anti-Olympic and IOC committee sentiment
Pandemic	Pandemic changing the Olympics	“The stadiums were empty.”
	Japanese bureaucracy	Japanese bureaucracy slowed the response to COVID-19.

	Public safety	Japanese athletes and civilian safety should come first
	Uncertain future	The lifestyle and value systems of the games are a thing of the past
Humanity	Overcoming adversity	“Japan did as well as they possibly could have under the circumstances.”
	Athlete spotlight	Athletes supporting each other this Olympics
	Mental health	Humanizing athletes is important
	Human rights	This Olympics brought up ideas of gender equality and human rights

Findings

Combining answers from all ten interviews, four themes arose from this research: Showcasing Japan, Criticism, Pandemic, and Humanity. All participants had different experiences watching the Olympics. While around half consumed media from Japanese sources and the other half consumed American media, their individual sentiments only scratch the surface of the diversity and complexity of Japan. To further frame their responses, I cite English language media articles from the year leading up to and during the 2020 Games. The following discussion of the themes encapsulates observations about the way Japan hosted the Games during the pandemic as it relates to past and future Japan.

Theme 1: Showcasing Japan

The theme of showcasing Japan emerged from the categories spanning Japanese technology, hospitality, national pride, Recovery Games, culture, Japanese image and reviving tourism. Under this topic, participants felt culture representation was highlighted by the Olympic opening ceremony. Two Japanese participants said that they felt the Olympics were useful for showcasing new Japanese technology during the ceremony, but fell short of representing historical Japanese culture in the ceremony.

According to participant 7, “When people imagine Japan, people say “Samurai,” and young people might say “Nintendo,” or “PlayStation,” the image is different between young people and old people.” Participant 9 separates Japanese culture into two elements: “There are two kinds of Japanese culture: traditional values and modern technology.”

While showcasing the culture of Japan, organizers had to be careful not to take away from the seriousness of the pandemic. In this sense, participant 1 notes the ceremony had to negotiate a difficult position. “They had to walk a fine line between celebrating this chance for the world to come together and celebrate athletic achievement while also recognizing that the world is hurting.” While the Olympics is ultimately a celebration of culture and competition, Japan could not ignore that the pandemic was on the forefront of the audience's mind.

Japan felt the effects of the pandemic on every level of its operations, but in particular, Japan’s volunteer force got considerable media attention. 10,000 of 80,000 unpaid volunteers dropped out of their volunteer positions due to COVID-19 related concerns. Few volunteers expected to be vaccinated before the onset of the games due to the delayed rollout of vaccines in Japan ([With Tokyo Olympics](#), 2021). However, the spirited displays of Japanese hospitality stood out to on-the-ground media and this study’s participants. Participant 9 comments:

“I know the volunteers of the Games got attention from the mass media. And they worked very hard, harder than the athletes expected, for security and food and even local citizens to allow them to get ready for games and so on.”

In juxtaposition to the anti-Olympic protests happening outside the stadium, the volunteers inside represented a welcoming atmosphere. Since fans were not permitted inside the stadium, volunteers filled their place as athlete supporters. Japanese hospitality (or *omotenashi*) is a point of cultural nationalism. Extending this welcome to foreigners simultaneously represents a new direction of multiculturalism for Japan. “Up until recently, Japan has been widely regarded as a mono-cultural/mono-racial country,

populated by a single ethnic group (*tan'itsu minzoku*) (Pellicanò, 2019).” For Tokyo 2020, citizens were encouraged to be part of the “internationalization” of Japan through volunteer activities such as translator or guide services (Tokyo Volunteer Navigator, n.d.; Pellicanò, 2019). The success of the volunteers reflects favorably on Japanese image, and shows progress as they begin to redefine Japanese identity.

In accordance with these efforts, rebranding Japan into a tourist destination has been a main goal of Japan’s international strategy. Japan sees value in reviving tourism, especially to rural areas off the beaten path of Japan's “Golden Route,” which features popular destinations like Tokyo and Kyoto. This goal could not be realized due to the spectator ban on the Tokyo 2020 games, but the combined display of technological soft power and strong volunteer presence helped Tokyo 2020 stand out as showing what Japan has to offer, even in the midst of a global pandemic.

Theme 2: Criticism

The single most prominent observation of the Games within this study was that participants felt they received an experience of Tokyo 2020 that was highly mediated, exacerbated due to the restrictions of the pandemic. Normally, there are opportunities for athletes and fans to explore the host country’s culture outside the limits of the Olympic city, but the strict COVID-19 quarantine procedures prevented any kind of departure from Olympic venues, commented Participant 4. Other American participants noted that the U.S. media “coverage is very American-centric,” leaving less time to hear about Japanese athletes and their stories. Lots of participants felt the media presence

produced a less authentic or “commercialized” version of Japanese culture. Participant 5 described it like this:

“I think it's just tricky to know what kind of cultural experience you're getting – who's managing it, or how it's handled– and that was highlighted intensely this year because of the pandemic. The games are supposed to help local businesses, but oftentimes local businesses get pushed out so you get a very “Coca-Cola” version of culture.”

Participants in the USA at the time of the Olympics noted the prevalence of the protest coverage in American media, even to the point that some found it difficult to separate the Games from the protests. However, these negative images associated with the games were not necessarily harmful to Japan in the eyes of the international community. However, within the participants in this study, a clear distinction was made between the IOC and the host nation of Japan. Regarding the sexist comments from Tokyo Olympics ex-organizing chief Yoshiro Mori, Participant 4 acknowledges the separation of IOC and Japan: “You saw this in flexibility and I don't think that was Japanese culture I think it was IOC culture.” Participant 4’s sentiments were reverberated in the answers of two other participants, reflecting an understanding of the IOC’s autonomy.

Theme 3: Pandemic

The lens through which the rest of the world perceived Japan during this Olympics relied on the media in an unprecedented way. This was so much so that respondents of this study remarked they felt pandemic safety took priority over all other

elements of the Game's image. Participant 8 conveyed that people became so focused on the pandemic, they lost sight of the real reason Japan wanted to host— the earthquakes, as in the triple disaster. This sentiment is reinforced by a deficit of actual Olympics news stories in favor of COVID-19 related content in American news, as per this study's participant comments. This tendency to promote fear-based or otherwise emotionally jarring news for the sake of media attention, or *disaster capitalism*, presents a skewed perception of reality for viewers (Klein, 2007).

For example, a Kyodo News poll released June 2021 showing 86% percent of Japanese were weary of a coronavirus surge related to the Games gained enormous traction in the media just before the opening in July ([86% in Japan](#), 2021). Concern for the safety of nearly fourteen billion Japanese living in the Tokyo area continued to rise as the percentage of vaccinated Japanese reached only around 37% at the time of the Olympics ([Ritchie et al.](#), 2021).

On the other hand, the situation inside the bubble of the Olympics was completely opposite. “Within the Olympics village, people were tested almost daily and almost everyone was vaccinated...So there is a clear double standard here” (Borpujari, 2021). This blatant inequity spurred “numerous discussions of the financial, structural, and personnel problems of the government, while its inadequate approach to combating the disease caused a significant increase in Japanese society's reluctance to host the Olympic Games even in 2021” (Rozmiarek, 2021). Even within this study's participant pool and across American and Japanese participants, attitudes towards the continuation of the Games were mixed. As for the future of the country after the Games, participants acknowledge these Games as a turning point for Japan.

Theme 4: Humanity

Through the challenges of the pandemic, people searched for hope with the idea that Tokyo 2020 could stand as a symbol of strength and unity in universal hard times. Japanese Olympic Committee President Yasuhiro Yamashita promised, “In a world that the coronavirus divided, sports will bond people”(Olympics: from June, 2021). However, more than the sport competition, what stood out to the participants of this research were the human displays of kindness and authenticity. Participant 6 noted that this Olympics brought up ideas of gender equality and human rights in new ways compared to past Olympics. An empathetic, person-oriented approach is often lost within the intense Olympic competition; so, in contrast with a world saturated in media, instances of human connection from Tokyo 2020 resonated with people the most.

The mental health revelation that occurred during the Games was centered around American gymnast Simone Biles and Japanese tennis player, Naomi Osaka. Their actions raised awareness for mental health related issues and worked to change perspectives on how viewers watch the Olympics– a reminder of the humanity of Olympic athletes, which gets lost when fans get caught up in competition and rivalry.

“In the words of NBC Sports’ Tim Layden, an “evolution” was taking place at the Olympics. In articles across ESPN, *Sports Illustrated*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Minnesota Star-Tribune*, and others, frequent mention was made of how these events reminded us of the humanity of these athletes and their support for each other, standing in opposition to the conventional demands of sport put forth by sports media outlets, sporting organizations, and fan cultures” (Rugg, 2021).

Participant 5 brings up Osaka and Biles under the prompt of what stood out to them the most this Olympics: “I think [Simone Biles’] courage is really amazing and inspiring but also, I think it's really important that we humanize athletes and humanize these people and the things they go through. Also the Japanese tennis player, Osaka...I think that going forward the Olympics needs to stay relevant and stay good. They're going to have to become a venue in which the athletes are allowed to be more political, which the IOC finally slacked its rules this year a bit.”

Osaka and Biles’ displays of bravery brought a sense of reality to an otherwise commercialized Olympic experience. As participant 5 touches on, the Olympics have a history of trying to separate politics from the Games, insisting the Games remain impartial in such matters. Because mental health is not inherently political, it introduces a new but not unwelcome aspect for the Olympics to consider pursuing further. The very survival of the Games in years to come may depend on its willingness to evolve, especially when it comes to the health –both physical and mental– of its athletes.

Discussion

The Olympics are changing, or, rather, the world is changing and the Olympics must change with it. But what can this shift indicate for Japan's image? As discussed in the second theme of criticism, Japan fell under heavy scrutiny this Olympics due to the myriad of scandals leading up to the event. The sensationalism of these do seem to draw attention, but not the type that would damage Japanese soft power or diplomatic relations. In the context of the IOC, those kinds of instances tend to be characterized by three distinct types of sports diplomacy, which are "State recognition, the Olympic truce, and networked political actors." (Murray, 2018, p.149-50) So, instead of a major image crisis, the 2020 Olympics may represent an opportunity for Japan. Based on the responses of participants that suggest the scandals and vaccine mismanagement dated Japan in the eyes of people abroad, Japan may work to reverse this effect by changing the narrative toward the future.

First, it is important to recognize the intended messages of Tokyo 2020 versus the reality of the event. In a carefully orchestrated event such as the Opening Ceremony, countries strategically plan what aspects they want to highlight. Usually, for Japan this means playing into its brand equity as a globally recognizable "technological powerhouse" during the Olympics (Kaneva, 2011). For example, in the 1964 Olympics, Japan emphasized the inauguration of the *shinkansen* (bullet train), drawing attention for its technologically superior design and performance (Wilson, 2012). Today's Japanese technology was demonstrated through its drone display, in which 1,824 drones formed the shape of the globe and the Olympic rings during the Opening and Closing Ceremonies. Japan plays into its recognizable strengths as the rules of soft power would

indicate, positioning itself according to technological prowess. Participants recognized this display as a tribute to Japanese culture under the showcasing Japan theme, where tech remains a defining element of Japanese image.

In addition to culture, another prominent message of Tokyo 2020 was the “Recovery Games.” Once again comparable to the 1964 Tokyo Games, Tokyo 2020 was bid on with the intention of presenting a new Japan to the rest of the world. 1964 was pivotal for the Japanese image to present itself after WWII, propelling it into an economic powerhouse of Asia. The 1964 Games promoted Japan as “a nation at the forefront of the international scene, fit to act as a champion of the non-Western world and firmly unified internally (Wilson, 2012).” In a similar sense, Tokyo 2020 had the goal of “Recovery Games” following the Fukushima triple disaster of 2011. The blow Japan’s image took from the Fukushima nuclear disaster was great. In the aftermath of the disaster, Japan announced its bid for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to help recover its national image. The messages surrounding what the Olympics would represent that year were very controlled. Olympic symbols, such as the torch (recovery flame *Fukkō no hi*) were given specialized names by the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC). The Opening Ceremony was no exception: a highly choreographed, and controlled event meant to send a specific message of friendship and peace to the audience.

The Chief Executive Creative Director for the ceremony, Nomura Mansai, explained he wanted to “incorporate new technology into older performance forms to present the ‘quality of the Japanese spirit’ in the service of the ‘reconstruction Olympics’ (*fukkō gorin*), invoking the idea that these Games would be partly designed to showcase and support Japan’s reconstruction following the 2011 tsunami and nuclear

disaster (Leheny, 2019).” The integration of new technology with old Japanese art forms echoes participant 9’s previous comment about separating culture in two parts. Mansai’s vision was realized; the Tokyo 2020 ceremony paid tribute to traditional Japanese Kabuki theater, which participant 1 mentioned. This dichotomy aligns with Japanese history, as a nation that underwent intense reforms in a postwar effort to modernize at an accelerated rate— quickly incorporating a Western constitution, free market, and tech innovations. While the recovery element of Japan’s showcase may have taken a backseat to the pandemic and disaster capitalism, the juxtaposition of old and new Japan coming together to deliver the 2020 Olympics stood out in a way that had yet to be achieved.

The viewers were also navigating new territory during these Olympics, as the only way they could experience the Games was through a screen. Studies on the effects of viewing international sporting events through the “prism of mass media” find that it significantly alters the experience for fans. Broadcasting rights in particular have intensified the “economic ties between sports and the media,” meaning the relation between profit, the media, and the Olympics has begun to evolve at an accelerated rate (Yan, 2020). The IOC now makes “73 percent of its income — \$4 billion in a four-year Olympic cycle — from selling rights to broadcast the games” ([Rosa-Aquino, 2021](#)). As the sole way for fans abroad and in Japan to participate in Tokyo 2020, television and media coverage were majorly important to how Japan would be perceived internationally. As it relates to the responses collected in this study, the main criticism of the Games seemed to be that the media presence produced a less authentic or “commercialized” version of Japanese culture.

Other criticism of the event was centered around the topic of IOC corruption. While organizers boast Tokyo 2020 as “the greenest Games yet,” many instances of abandoned new stadiums left untouched after hosting the Games plague Olympic history. Modern Olympics “radiate neoliberal capitalism in several ways,” pushing countries to invest in capital-intensive infrastructure that lacks long term use and sustainability (Boykoff, 2016, p.156). Like in Participant 5’s comment on commercialized culture, big businesses often push out local ones, leading to heightened capitalism and even less room for originality.

The slew of IOC-related scandals and anti-Olympic protests in the months leading up to and during the Olympics only contributed more to these dissatisfactions. While protests commonly surround every Olympics, Tokyo 2020’s were fueled by Japan’s choice to host upwards of ten thousand foreign athletes at a time when Japan’s vaccination rate was relatively low in comparison to other highly developed countries (Borpujari, 2021). These protesters saw that money and resources used to sponsor Tokyo 2020 were needed elsewhere in Japan for disaster relief and supporting local communities after the catastrophe, thus proving the “Recovery Olympics” tagline ironic (Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020).” So, in the absence of a solid “recovery” tagline and media criticism, Japan should pursue a new narrative to project its global image.

As discussed in the literature review, Japan’s rebrand following the triple disaster relied heavily on the 2020 Games to reach world audiences in the intended fashion. As opposed to looking back at the Games as “a failure” or “a success,” the country now has a chance to redirect these debates into something productive. Using the

framework of Duignan, Japan is in the unique position to re-imagine its image after the Olympics.

“Given the scale of the country's tourist growth and place-development ambition in the lead up –and beyond– Tokyo 2020, fueled and enabled by a dual shock, produced by an ecological shock (Fukushima) and an economic shock (the Tokyo 2020 Olympics). The notion of shock points to the critical political-economic idea that shocks, whether they are internal disaster like Fukushima or exogenous shocks like Olympics, destabilize local environments and induce change, in this case, affording host-culture to be leveraged for re-imaging purposes”(Duignan, 2021; Klein, 2007).

Responses from this study add to this claim by reflecting ways Japan may change as a result of hosting during the pandemic, but go on further to indicate the Olympics’ role in this transformation. Under the theme of Pandemic, one participant acknowledges that Japan will have to react to the shock of the virus by changing its current strategies to direct tourism to rural areas. As different variants of the COVID-19 virus make their way around the globe, travel –let alone tourism– in the aftermath of the pandemic remains extremely difficult to navigate. During the next Summer Olympics in Paris, a hybrid model of new containment technologies merged with the proven methods. “In that sense, Tokyo will forever remain a watershed (Majumdar, 2021).” If Tokyo 2020 can offer guidance in way of streaming technology, crowd management, and transmission mitigation strategies, the events of the 2020 Games may represent something other than controversy and mismanagement.

Shifting the narrative of Tokyo 2020 from “Recovery Games” to a country on the precipice of a pandemic was an unintended result of deciding to postpone the

Olympics. Yet, globally, the 2020 Games have created space for discussions about the future as the pandemic persists into yet another Olympic cycle. As the first country to host during the COVID pandemic, Tokyo 2020 actually sets a high standard for Games to come. Though sensationalized by the media, Japan's actions to decrease cases immediately after the spike triggered by the Olympic and Paralympic Games were very effective, and as of November 1 2021 Tokyo only saw 9 new cases (Song & Karako, 2021). Attributed to high vaccination rates and commitment to mask-wearing, a study in partnership with National Center for Global Health and Medicine and Center for Clinical Sciences named Japan "successful [in] fighting the past five waves of the pandemic" that took place during the 2020 Olympics (Song & Karako, 2021). Technology, information sharing and extended research on the effects of hosting mega sporting events around COVID will become major assets to the continuation of the Olympics and the lasting legacy of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Media and mental health movements also represent emerging trends associated with a culture shift starting at the 2020 Olympics. This shift was led by the humans at the center of the Olympic experience, the athletes themselves. Olympic athletes as symbols and icons date all the way back to ancient Greece's Olympic truce, athletes represented ambassadors of peace (Dubinsky, 2019; Miller, 2004). The athletes of these Games represented something a bit different: mental health. While the pandemic wreaked havoc on many people's physical health, and the world shut down in an effort to decrease virus transmission, mental health struggles grew worldwide (Kumar & Nayar, 2021). The topic of mental health in the 2020 Olympics was as timely as it was prevalent for the athletes participating.

Two women athletes who remained at the forefront of these discussions were Simone Biles (USA) and Naomi Osaka (Japan). After dropping out the vault and uneven bars finals due to mental health related concerns, Biles was met with sympathy from fellow American athletes. Biles spoke out about how what the media reports and what viewers see on the screen doesn't tell the whole story of an athlete or their struggle. Biles' use of global platforms and status as the most decorated gymnast in history meant putting a spotlight on mental health issues during a highly stressful time. Her message resonated with international audiences, causing Google searches on mental health to take off and sparking online discussions of what it means to take time off from their sport to prioritize mental health as an athlete ([Park](#), 2021). Likewise, Osaka spoke out about her mental health battle. In the months prior to her Olympic tennis debut, Osaka withdrew from the French Open, and skipped Wimbledon to preserve her mental health. Though under heavy criticism, Osaka declined interviews for the same reason.

Like many places in the world, there is still immense stigma surrounding mental health in Japan. Some of this is attributed to the triple disaster, which uprooted many Japanese lives and caused massive psychiatric, social, and physical outcomes (Karz et al., 2014). Coming out of the 2020 Olympics, Japan is faced with an opportunity to formally address mental health while awareness is heightened from the situations with Biles and Osaka. Improving national health has been connected to soft power, presenting an opportunity for Japan to focus on advancing mental health following the athlete activism of the 2020 Olympics (McBride et al., 2019). To further this point, Olympic athlete activists like Biles and Osaka have the power and global influence to change perceptions and even brand their country as more progressive or democratic

(Dubinsky, 2022). The culture shift in the Olympics places a spotlight on Japan to respond, and potentially set the intention of supporting mental health in sports as a pillar of its country image and sports diplomacy history.

From a soft power perspective, taking on some of the mental health discourses that emerged during the Games could be very advantageous for Japan to take control of the Tokyo 2020 narrative. The goals of hosting the Olympics are centered around soft power objectives, like increasing trade, tourism, and foreign direct investment opportunities (Auruskeviciene et al., 2010). As an outcome of soft power activities, country image is a main consideration for the Tokyo 2020 Games. As defined earlier by Buhmann & Ingenhoff (2015), country image is influenced by public communication processes that are established within the international community. Individual perceptions are important to this discourse as they influence the community and vice versa (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). The extensive media coverage of the Olympics heightens these interactions, as perceptions and attitudes toward the host culture shift as a result of hosting (Auruskeviciene et al., 2010). The participant responses of this study reflect this to an extent, signifying that although audiences do not hold Japan in contempt for hosting the games, the events exposed certain ways Japan failed to meet their expectations for hosting during the pandemic, as represented in the Criticism theme. Taking into account these views, Japan should address these themes that arose in future sports diplomacy endeavors and other interactions with the international community.

Overall, how Japan presents itself in the months and years following the Games will likely be defining for the country's image trajectory. The results and findings of

this study suggest it will find the most success if it is able to situate itself in a forward-thinking way, particularly in the areas of dealing with COVID-19 crisis and mental health activism. These discourses represent areas of emerging relevance worldwide as a result of the pandemic. The timely manner in which the Olympics brought these issues to the attention of audiences around the world signals a critical moment in history for the Olympics and Japan itself. Japan may not have asked to host the first pandemic Olympics, but it can still find effective ways to project its national image.

Conclusion

The combined lessons from the four themes of this research reveal the messages of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and provide a starting point for how to advance Japan's image going forward. Taking into account the dual-shock produced by the 2020 Games and Fukushima, Japan finds itself with the opportunity to redesign its image to meet its tourism goals and boost its internal soft power by prioritizing themes that arose during the Olympics, which were handling COVID-19 and mental health discussion. The Olympic narrative Japan focuses on post-Tokyo 2020 will be indicative of how the country as a host will be remembered for years to come. According to these findings, at this moment Japan stands at a crossroads to pursue these new directions as COVID-19 and the Olympics cause the world to reevaluate how we live.

Limitations for discovering the effect of the 2020 Olympics on Japanese image from this study include only interview participants affiliated with the University of Oregon and a relatively small sample size compared to similar studies. Participants in this study represent varying degrees of time and familiarity with Japan and their opinions should be interpreted as a sample of what was on the minds of viewers in the months directly after the Olympics. In no way do the findings of this study represent an accurate portrayal of the diversity of respective opinions and cultures of Japan or America.

While this study was intentionally conducted in the months directly after the event, the long-term effects of the Games on Japan's image could not be addressed. Consequently, a possibility for further research on this topic would be investigating the prevalence of this Olympics and other significant Games in the years and decades after.

Data from viewers in countries other than Japan and the U.S. may also present possible areas for expansion on these findings.

Moreover, continued research in the area of long-term impact of the pandemic on Japanese health and society is needed. As the world approaches the third year of a pandemic-affected world, effects of mental health on country image during the pandemic remains an area of nation branding that requires further study. Building on the findings discussed in this paper, the intersection of sport and health presents an emerging area of interest and may lend itself to be influential for furthering discussions of mental health on a global level. How Japan and the Olympics continue to deal with athlete mental health situations may determine their potential to set global standards due to media sensation in a highly digital world. Closely monitoring how these messages are received across cultures may present an opportunity for more instances of athlete activism in future Olympics. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics represent the starting point for these discussions and will remain a landmark for future research.

Interview Guide Appendix

1. What role do Olympic Games play in showcasing a host country's culture? Does this role change in the case of a pandemic?
2. From the coverage of the Games that you saw, did you feel Japan and Japanese culture were well-represented?

OR From the coverage of the Games that you saw, what was your impression of Japanese culture?

3. What are the current challenges Japan faces regarding diplomacy and national image?
4. Do you think the Olympic postponement and spectator ban has affected Japan's image? Has it changed your perception of Japan's progress as a nation? Why?
5. What message did you think the Tokyo 2020 Olympics conveyed to an international audience?
6. What message or messages stand out to you the most about the 2020 Olympics? Why?

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